



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Natural Resources
Conservation
Service

101 South Main
Temple, TX
76501-7602

Phone (254) 742-9800

<http://www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov>

Fax (254) 742-9819

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For more information, please contact:

Norman P. Bade, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs
Norman.Bade@tx.usda.gov

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USDA-NRCS Seeks Comments on Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is seeking comments from Texas landowners and organizations on its flagship conservation costshare program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Dr. Larry D. Butler, State Conservationist for NRCS in Texas, is launching a comment period to allow public input on EQIP through March 15, 2005.

“NRCS periodically reviews and updates the EQIP priorities, with input from the public, to ensure the program continues to address the most important resource needs as well as any emerging resource issues,” says Dr. Butler. The program originated in the 1996 Farm Bill and was re-authorized in 2002. “Updating the national priorities will help us prepare for the 2006 program year and for the next Farm Bill reauthorization in 2007.”

Public listening sessions will be held in each State in coordination with the State Technical Committee. NRCS is looking for a wide array of public and stakeholder input from these sessions. Feedback from agricultural organizations, environmental groups, commodity organizations, agencies, individuals and others is encouraged.

A listening session will be held on March 1, 2005, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Hilton Austin Airport Hotel, Del Valle Room, in Austin. In addition to State listening sessions, the Federal Register and the NRCS national website , www.nrcs.usda.gov, can be used to submit written comments. The culmination of the State listening sessions will be a national public listening session scheduled for the spring of 2005.

“These listening sessions are not exclusive to EQIP,” adds Dr. Butler. “We also invite comments on our other programs, such as the Farm and Ranchlands Protection Program, Grassland Reserve Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, Wetlands Reserve Program, and Conservation Technical Assistance Program.” NRCS will be providing updates on all Farm Bill program activities in Texas as a part of the listening session.

(more)

All comments received will be recorded and forwarded for national review and consideration in developing the 2006 EQIP and beyond.

EQIP's national priorities, which NRCS uses to guide which producers will be selected for program funding, are:

1. Water Quality: Reductions of nonpoint source pollution, such as nutrients, sediment, pesticides, or excess salinity in impaired watersheds consistent with TMDLs where available, as well as the reduction of groundwater contamination and the conservation of ground and surface water resources;
2. Air Quality: Reduction of emissions, such as particulate matter, nitrogen oxides (NOx), volatile organic compounds, and ozone precursors and depleters that contribute to air quality impairment violations of National Ambient Air Quality Standards;
3. Soil Erosion: Reduction in soil erosion and sedimentation from unacceptable levels on agricultural land; and
4. Wildlife Habitat: Promotion of at-risk species habitat conservation.

The following questions will be used to guide comments on the EQIP national priority portion of the session:

- 1) What emerging natural resource issues are not addressed by the current national EQIP priorities? Identify the nature of the concern and its extent or significance within Texas.
- 2) What modifications, if any, are needed to the four existing National priorities? Do these existing priorities continue to reflect the critical national resource needs and concerns?

A compilation of inputs from the States will be presented at the National Listening Session tentatively scheduled for this spring. Further details on the National Listening Session will be forthcoming.

Comments can be faxed to 254-742-9819, emailed to norman.bade@tx.usda.gov or sent by U.S. mail to Norman P. Bade, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, USDA-NRCS, 101 South Main, Temple, Texas 76501.

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